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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TASHKENT 001596

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SUBJECT: PROTESTS REPORTED IN FERGHANA VALLEY AND TASHKENT

REF: TASHKENT 1479

Classified By: CDA BRAD HANSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

11. (C) Summary: Independent websites and Embassy contacts have reported scattered demonstrations in the Ferghana Valley and in Tashkent this past week. The demonstrations reportedly have been caused by rising food prices and scarcities. Officials in the city of Margilan also reportedly have paid merchants to lower prices during a planned visit on September 7-8 by President Karimov. At first glance, these reports appear credible. End summary.

PRESS REPORTS OF PROTESTS IN FERGHANA VALLEY

12. (U) Several independent websites reported demonstrations on September 3 in the Ferghana Valley cities of Andijon, Namangan and Ferghana. Radio Free Europe (RFE) reported on September 3 that dozens of residents, upset with rising prices for basic staples such as meat, flour and oil, marched from the Yangi-arab village to the Oltiaryq district administration building before proceeding to the Ferghana province administration building in Ferghana City. Before dispersing, the protesters were met by officials of the Ferghana City administration, who agreed to investigate their complaints. RFE also quoted independent journalist and Uzmtronom operator Sergey Ezhkov, who said that people across Uzbekistan are unhappy about rising prices for staple goods and low wages and that security forces have been put on high alert in the Ferghana Valley. The article also noted unconfirmed rumors of serious clashes between the local population and security forces in Andijon.

13. (C) Poloff spoke on September 6 with human rights activist Abdusalom Ergashev, who was quoted by RFE. Ergashev told poloff that the protest over rising food prices began at 10:00 on September 3 when a group of about 100 persons from Yangi-arab village marched out to the Oltiaryq district administration building, where they were met by local officials. Several of the protestors were then invited to Ferghana City to meet with officials from the provincial administration, where they delivered their complaints about rising food prices before dispersing. Ergashev also told poloff about a separate demonstration a few days earlier by a group of women at the Huvaydo mausoleum in the Chimion region of Ferghana province. The protest started when well-known poet Abdul Aripov, a close associate of President Karimov and member of Uzbekistan's Senate, was observed visiting the shrine. A group of approximately 40 women then quickly

formed, demanding an explanation from Aripov and President Karimov about a decision by local authorities to prevent the export of fruit to Russia, which is a major source of income in the region.

¶4. (C) A German Embassy officer told poloff that he heard of an additional small protest over rising food prices in Namangan. The demonstration involved 30 to 40 protestors, mostly elderly, who disbanded after Namangan city officials agreed to investigate their complaints. According to the German officer, the demonstrators were observed by police, who did not interfere with the protest.

PRICES FOR STAPLES GOING UP

¶5. (U) The RFE and independent website reports cited rising prices for staple goods as the principle cause of the protests. Uzmtronom reported on September 3 that the average price for a kilogram of flour in Uzbekistan has increased to one dollar and a kilogram of meat has increased from 3.75 dollars to 5.70 dollars (Note: one dollar is equal to approximately 1,275 soum End Note.) According to Ferghana.ru, bread now costs between 200 to 1,500 soum (.16 to 1.17 dollars) in a country where the minimum monthly wage is only 12 dollars. Ferghana.ru also reported on September 3 that the price of bread in Ferghana City has recently doubled and that lines have formed at the Mirobad Bazaar in Tashkent for vegetable oil. Prices for many basic consumer goods and services have surged since the beginning of August, when a presidential decree raised the minimum salary (reftel).

REPORTED CURFEW IN MARGILAN AHEAD OF PRESIDENTIAL VISIT

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¶6. (U) Ferghana.ru reported on September 4 that a curfew would be declared in Margilan in Ferghana province on September 5 after a series of disturbances in recent weeks.

Uzmtronom reported that a September 7-8 visit by President Karimov to celebrate Margilan's 2000 year anniversary was the reason behind the increased security measures. The website also noted increased sightings of military personnel movements throughout the Ferghana Valley, which it speculated also was tied to the upcoming presidential visit. In addition, Uzmtronom reported that city officials have offered 8 dollars to residents who live on the presidential city tour route to vacate their homes, 40 dollars to produce vendors who lower their prices and have required all Soviet-era cars to be hidden from sight.

¶7. (U) The Ferghana.ru article also stated that city authorities have angered local residents by demanding that they stop driving Soviet-era cars, ostensibly for safety reasons. According to the article, residents believe (correctly or not) that the authorities are pressuring them into purchasing new Daewoo cars produced in Uzbekistan.

ANDIJON MARKET STALLS BURNED IN JULY

¶8. (C) Protests reportedly occurred in Andijon this July, as well. In late July, several market stalls were burned down at a bazaar in Andijon. In a press release from August 15, Human Rights Alliance activist Abdillo Tojiboy-ugli said that the several market stalls were burned in late July by individuals upset by the city's lack of cottonseed oil, which is heavily relied upon by rural Uzbeks for cooking. On August 23, however, Free Farmers opposition party leader Nigora Khidoyatova provided poloff with a different account of the incident. She said that the fire occurred after several hundred women traders were evicted from the bazaar to make way for the construction of the stalls. She speculated that some of the women then burned down the stalls in protest. In addition, Khidoyatova said that a guard at the

market also was lynched.

PROTESTS OVER RISING PRICES IN TASHKENT

¶9. (C) Reports of protests have not been confined to the Ferghana Valley. On September 4, an ex-deputy hokim (mayor) of Tashkent's Uch-Tepe region and reliable Embassy contact, Adolat Nasirova (strictly protect), told poloff that demonstrations were organized in August by residents of Uch-Tepe's 13th, 21st, and 23rd blocs. The residents, she said, were upset by rising prices and threatened to take their complaints directly to Tashkent's Hokim (mayor), Abdukahhor Tukhtaev, and the Presidential Apparatus. Representatives from Tashkent's Hokimiyat (city hall) met the protestors, and convinced them to disperse after promising to investigate their complaints. After the meetings were dispersed, Tukhtaev reportedly threatened to fire any mahalla (neighborhood) chairman who allowed such meetings to take place in their neighborhoods again. Nasirova said that rumors have circulated that Tukhtaev himself will be fired as part of a continuing Government shakeup ahead of the expected presidential election in December. She added that Tukhtaev is not seen as a serious powerbroker, and that Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyaev is viewed as the true "mayor" of Tashkent. Furthermore, Nasirova said that she had heard of similar neighborhood protests occurring recently in Chilanazar, which like Uch-Tepe, is one of Tashkent's poorer areas.

WOMEN THREATEN SELF-IMMOLATION AT TASHKENT BAZAAR

¶10. (C) Nasirova also told poloff about a confrontation last week between several women traders and police at the Chilanazar Bazaar in Tashkent. The police reportedly raided the bazaar to confiscate smuggled goods, which according to the contact, constitute a majority of the items available at the market. After seizing the wares of 23 traders from Tashkent, the police approached a group of women traders from Samarkand and Bukhara, who put up a struggle and then doused their goods and bodies with lighter fluid, threatening to light themselves on fire if the police tried to seize their

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goods. The contact speculated that the women from the regions were more aggressive than the other traders because they probably had their life savings invested in the goods and may have felt they had nothing left to lose. After a tense standoff, the police were ordered by superiors to stand down and leave the bazaar, and the women and remaining traders were able to keep their goods.

INCREASED NUMBER OF WOMEN OBSERVED AT MARDIKORS

¶11. (C) In addition, Nasirova said that a friend who works at the Business Women's Association in Tashkent reported seeing a five-fold increase around the country in the number of women offering their services at "mardikors," labor markets traditionally for unemployed men, but increasingly also including some unemployed women. The friend also reportedly told Nasirova that mardikors are appearing in new locations, including in the town of Chirchik in Tashkent province. Women are usually hired at mardikors to serve as maids or cleaning ladies.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Spontaneous demonstrations over economic conditions are not unusual in Uzbekistan and are often handled by authorities promising to investigate protesters' complaints. The reported demonstrations July thru September seem to have been handled in the normal way. However, with the continuing rise in prices, and the possibility of elections in December, protests may prove a bit more challenging for authorities.

